

469a
530

AN ESTIMATE OF LINCOLN.

A SERMON PREACHED BY

HOWARD AGNEW JOHNSTON, D. D.,

Pastor Forty-first Street Presbyterian Church, Chicago.

February 9, 1896.

Judges 3:15. "The Lord raised them up a deliverer."

It has been so from that day unto our own. At the crisis moments in human history the conflicts of the nations in which the destiny of man's welfare has hung in the balance, have ever centered about some one man who was not simply the child of destiny in the hour of his good fortune, but who was preeminently the child of divine providence by whose hand the God of men and of nations has wrought his purpose through the years. It is of such a man that I desire to speak to-day. More than thirty years have passed away since his funeral casket, drenched with a nation's tears, was borne from Washington to his beloved Springfield. During those years the fame of many a man, then counted great, has faded away; but the fame of Lincoln grows more serene and clear and splendid with every passing year. During those years there has been more said and written about him than about any other man. And the Christian pulpit will prove recreant to its trust, if it shall fail to exalt his name with that of Washington, in the effort to keep alive the flame of pure patriotism in the hearts of our children and our children's children.

It is of the man and of his mission that I wish to speak briefly to-day.

I. Of the man it needs not that we should pause long to speak of his youth of poverty; but it is important to note that

while his father had wandered down into the early settlements of Kentucky, his grandfather and earlier ancestors from Massachusetts and Virginia were men of no mean quality; and the fact remains that Abraham Lincoln was born with the blood of noble sires in his veins.

I. His qualities of character were manifest from his earliest boyhood. It was sterling integrity that gave him the name of "honest Abe." It was an ambition of a noble soul combined with a tenacity of industry that gave him such an education, though a stranger to the culture of the schools, as to make his public utterances and state papers well-nigh matchless products of clear, forceful, convincing English speech. It was a splendid self-mastery that led him to live through all his days without ever indulging in intoxicating liquor. It was a native tenderness of heart honored by a strong man that led him to be kind and gentle toward the unfortunate, and the champion of their cause. And it was his sense of obligation to the right that made him the unswerving champion of justice, and the unflinching defender of the oppressed.

2. As a man Lincoln was born with the genius of statesmanship. Not since that Corsican lieutenant of artillery presided over a congress of kings, has a man leaped into fame in a day, as did he; and yet the world is recognizing the fact more clearly every year that Napoleon lacked that mastery of foresight and of insight which Lincoln possessed, until the *London Times* pronounced his second inaugural address to be the most sublime state paper of the century. Moreover it was not as a partisan that he served his countrymen, but as a patriot. If ever a man rose above his party it was when Lincoln called as many men into his cabinet who were loyal democrats as there were loyal republicans, and especially when he called Stanton to be his secretary of war. Therefore we do not consider him to-day as a party politician, but as the patriot and statesman that he was.

II. As we attempt briefly to appreciate something of the mighty mission to which God called this man, I ask you to remember that nearly forty years before he was born the Declaration of Independence was signed by our fathers of the revolution asserting that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were the inalienable rights of every man. At that very moment the institution of slavery was dragging its foul trail across the colonies. Washington saw its evils and warned his countrymen against it;

and so did others who followed him among the leaders of the nation; but the industry of New England was bound up with the industry of the south, and the moral consciousness of the people was blunt to the deepest sense of righteousness touching the bondage of the slave.

1. Back in the forties a young man, clad in homespun, was standing in the slave-mart of New Orleans watching husbands and wives separated forever, and children doomed never again to look into their parents' faces as the hammer of the auctioneer fell at the call of the highest bidder. With quivering lips this young flat-boatman turned to his companion, and said: "If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I will hit it hard, by the eternal God!" That "thing" was woven into the very fibre of the life of the nation, was legalized in half the states of the union, was entrenched in church and state alike; and the wildest imagination could not have dreamed that in twenty years that same young man would hit it, and hit it so hard as to put out of existence in this fair land the slave, the slave-mart, and the slave-master. But this he did, as God led him through the years to the consummation.

2. That which gave him national fame was his great debate with the brilliant Douglas. The verdict upon that debate is that while Douglas was as keen and ready in argument, Lincoln carried his discussion to a higher level by pushing with intense earnestness the moral elements in the great issue. And this was ever characteristic of the man. Following the fame of the debate with Douglas, came the address at Cooper Institute at New York City, where the very same quality of conviction was manifest. They tell us that the intensely earnest manner of Lincoln as he rose to speak created an instant hush over his audience, and these were his first words: "My fellow citizens, there is in fact, but one political question before the people of this country, and that is: Is slavery right? or is it wrong?" To the end he held his audience to every syllable of his utterance, proving that our fathers believed slavery to carry in it a curse for the nation, and closing with these words: "Men of America! history through the centuries has been teaching us that right makes right. Let it be our mission in this 19th century to reverse the maxim, and to declare that right makes might!" Even then he had caught the inspiration for his life work.

3. Not many months later, as he accepted the nomination for the presidency, he uttered these pregnant and prophetic

words: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect that it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other." His words meant more than even he dreamed, though he knew they involved the greatest problem that any president of the United States had ever attempted to solve. This is evident from his farewell address to his fellow-townsmen at Springfield: "My friends; no one can realize the sadness I feel at this parting. I go to assume a task more difficult than that which has devolved upon any man since the days of Washington. He never would have succeeded except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied. I feel that I cannot succeed without the same divine blessing which sustained him; and on the same Almighty Being I place my reliance for support. And I hope you, my friends, will all pray that I may receive that Divine assistance, without which I cannot succeed, but with which success is certain." From a boy Lincoln had been a student of the Word of God. While president, he wrote these words to Joshua Speed: "I am profitably engaged reading the Bible. Take all of this book upon reason that you can, and the balance upon faith, and you will live and die a better man." He was also a man of prayer. This fact comes to the light as the dark days of the war crowded in upon him problems on every side which it would seem no mortal man could untangle and conquer. I think perhaps the crisis hour in his life, and in the history of the republic, was that night when the news of the battle of Chancellerville convulsed the nation. If ever Lincoln stood alone with God it was that night. The country was weary of war, hundreds of homes were stricken with the news of the slaughter of loved ones, and the President's desk was piled high with letters which he did not read, for he knew what was in them. They were pleading with him to give over the struggle and have the war cease whatever might be the cost. Members of Congress and of the Cabinet thronged the White House to give advice and warning. At last they were all gone, and only his private secretary was left in an adjoining room to tell us of the night as the hours went by. Continuing his work, he heard the President take up a steady tread in his room. Ten o'clock came, eleven o'clock, midnight passed, and still that ceaseless tread continued while the silence was such that the tick-

ing of the clock could* be heard. Suddenly there was a pause and the secretary paused in his labors to listen. No sound broke the silence. God alone was auditor there. Again the tread continued. At two o'clock the secretary departed to get an hour's rest, and the last sound he heard was the ceaseless tread of that man who was carrying a nation's destiny upon his mind and heart. He was treading the wine-press alone. He did not cease that vigil until the morning dawn came into the eastern sky. But with the dawn came peace to his soul. No man will ever know how those hours were spent; but this significant fact came to light when the emancipation proclamation was being considered. Mr. Lincoln said to his Cabinet: "Its enunciation can no longer be delayed. Public sentiment will sustain it, and I have promised my God that I will do it." Secretary Chase, somewhat surprised at the statement, asked the President if he had understood him, and Mr. Lincoln replied, "I made a solemn vow before God that if General Lee were driven back from Maryland I would crown the result by declaration of freedom to the slaves." We also have the testimony of General Sickles that the President said to him: "In the pinch of your campaign, when everybody was panic stricken, and nobody could tell what was going to happen, oppressed by the gravity of our affairs, I went to my room and got down on my knees before Almighty God and prayed to him mightily for victory at Gettysburg. I told Him that this was His war, that our cause was His cause, but that we could not stand another Fredericksburg or Chancellorsville. And I then and there made a solemn vow that if He would stand by our boys at Gettysburg I would stand by Him. And He did, and I will." You know the result at Gettysburg, and no man can read the remarkable speech which Lincoln delivered there without realizing that he believed that God had a destiny for this nation, and that he was impelled by the conviction that he was doing the will of God. He said: "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced—to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

4. I would fain dwell upon some of those incidents which reveal the great heart of this man. The mercy with which he seasoned justice is however well known. I can only refer to his second inaugural address a moment to show what was in his heart toward God and man. Speaking of the two parts of the divided nation, he said: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.’ If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time he now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from these divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—ferently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with a lash shall be paid with another drawn by a sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘The judgments

of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' With malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish this work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Such is the heritage which this man has left us. The passing years will give us a clearer vision of its worth. We look to the South American Republics and see Brazil emancipate her slaves. We behold the prayer of Livingston finding answer in the increasing opposition to slavery even into the heart of the dark continent. It was the fidelity of Lincoln to God and the right which made this possible to-day. Well may we exalt and emulate his patriotism, confident that only by being faithful as he was faithful can we establish the nation in that stability of righteousness that will bring the fruit of prosperity and peace.

PRESS OF MARTIN H. KENDIG, 85 FIFTH AVENUE.

11 2009.084.04066